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# Dwelling Poetically in the House of Being: Heidegger, Language and Space

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*Both space and metaphor share an ambiguous state in Martin Heidegger's thought. Human spatiality is believed to be derivative from 'care' which is in essence a temporal notion, and metaphor is considered responsible for the sensible and non-sensible dichotomy that constitutes western metaphysics. However, it is spatial metaphor that allows Heidegger to discuss human existence as a distinctive condition of being-in-a-world which is revealed through language. In this paper I will argue that these contradictions in Heidegger's thought can be resolved by revealing the silenced and marginalised presence of both space and body. His spatial metaphors, especially the one that presents language as the 'house of Being', comprise the gist of his later thought that tried to capture language as the unique emergence that takes place in and as the terrain of human experience.*

## INTRODUCTION: SEEMING CONTRADICTIONS?

For Heidegger (1973) the human condition finds its best description in the phrase *being-in-the-world*. With this term he wants to stress that a human being is awoken in a world or thrown into a world from which is inseparable; a human being is in fact the relation it shares with the world it receives. There is no outside determination of this world or even a theoretical or practical preparation for entering this world; we rather know it through our *being-there* (Dasein) which is Heidegger's basic term for human existence. Despite the intense spatial nuance of these terms, Heidegger argues in *Being and Time* that Dasein's spatiality is based on care (Sorge) which is 'the temporal modality that holds together the structure of being-in-the-world' (Vallega, 2003, pp. 62-63). As Heidegger makes clear this means that 'Dasein's specific spatiality must be grounded in temporality' and is not 'a result of his bodily nature' (Heidegger, 1973, pp. 418 and 82).

In this way, early Heidegger succeeds in downgrading both space and body with a theory that prioritizes time but is phrased in spatial terms. This contradiction pervades *Being and Time*. For example, his two main terms for relating to things, that is, the 'ready-to-hand' and the 'present-at-hand' encourage a momentary diversion towards the body but his thought never actually stray from its temporal focus.

In Heidegger's later writings (1971; 1982a; 1982b; 1982c) space makes its presence even more commanding and his language is extensively shaped by spatial and architectural metaphors; things gather the world, thinking is building, mortals dwell poetically, language is the 'house of being' and his own language which verbalizes an attempt to overcome the danger of metaphysical thinking is, in fact, metaphorical through and through. However, in Lecture Six of *The Principle of*

*Reason* Heidegger argues that the function of metaphor is exactly what founds the artificial and harmful distinction between sensible and non-sensible that grounds western metaphysics.

The idea of transposing and of “metaphor” is based upon the distinguishing, if not complete separation, of the sensible and the nonsensible as two realms that subsist on their own. The setting up of this partition of the sensible and nonsensible, between the physical and nonphysical is a basic feature of what is called metaphysics and which normatively determines Western thinking (Heidegger, 1996, p. 48).

Heidegger’s distrust of metaphor appears in agreement with Hegel’s explanation that metaphors ‘arise from the fact that a word, which in the first instance merely designates something entirely sensuous ..., is carried over ... into a spiritual sphere ...’ (Hegel cited in Derrida, 1974, p. 24). Derrida argues that this interpretation points to a ‘movement of idealization’ (p. 25) that is inherent in metaphor and creates words or concepts that are treated as a ‘natural’ language that produces the metaphysical lexicon (*ibid.*). In fact, he argues: ‘Concept is a metaphor, foundation is a metaphor, theory is a metaphor; and there is no meta-metaphor for them’ (p. 23). These concepts are reductions from experience but through philosophy they claim the right to structure experience whilst they throw into oblivion both the original meaning and the act of its displacement. Derrida argues that this take on metaphor suggests that ‘philosophy would be a self-eliminating process of generating metaphor. It would be of the nature of philosophy that philosophical culture be a rude obliteration’ (p. 9). So rude in fact, that allowed ‘the term *sense* to be applied to that which should be foreign to the senses’ (p. 28). But if this is true, and this is the second contradiction, why does Heidegger’s own thought rely on metaphor in order to bring to light a conception of language that is forgotten?

In order to explore this question, I first need to point out that Heidegger’s concerns are directed not so much towards the forgetfulness of the sensuous but to the fact that such a notion of a purely sensuous and thus literal sphere should not exist. In Lecture Six of *The Principle of Reason*, that is, in the very text that he utters his concerns about metaphor, he argues that reason does not have an absolute foundation and it is rather found in beings. Beings should not be thought as what we represent but rather what we see and hear. After all, he tells us, Plato named ‘the genuine element of beings *ιδέα*—the face of beings and that which is viewed by us’ and ‘Heraclitus named what constituted the genuine element in beings—*λόγος*—the locution of beings to which we respond in hearing’ (Heidegger, 1996, p. 47). For Heidegger this etymological clarification suggests that the non-sensible is always already implied in the sensible and hence perception is not a process of registration of external stimuli but the construction of the stimuli themselves. He points out that

Whatever is heard by us never exhaust itself in what our ears, which from a certain point of view can be seen as separated sense organs, can pick up. More precisely, if we hear, something is not simply added to what the ear picks up; rather, what the ear perceives and how it perceives will already be attuned and determined by what we hear... Of course our hearing organs are in a certain

regard necessary, but they are never the sufficient condition of our hearing, for that hearing which accords and affords us whatever there really is to hear. The same holds for our eyes and our vision. If human vision remained confined to what is piped in as sensations through the eye to the retina, then, for instance, the Greeks would never have been able to see Apollo in a statue of a young man or, to put this in a better way, they would never have been able to see the statue in and through Apollo (pp. 47-48).

For Heidegger perception is not a neutral registration of an external world, because there is no world that is neatly separated between a subject and an object. Our human bodies in their structure are never of the plain sensible nature; they always include the imaginative dimension in their potentiality to construct what they receive. Our receiving is always a building and for this reason building is thinking. Heidegger is suspicious of metaphor because in his interpretation metaphor presupposes a sensible origin which mirrors the world and moves towards an abstraction that constitutes the non-sensible. In order to make his objection to that which in his interpretation founds western metaphysics he emphasises the presence of meaning that is already imputed in our sense organs. Perception is always already conception. This, turn, however, bestows a certain primacy to the intelligible which, I believe, tends to obscure the sensible. Human materiality nevertheless has its own meaning because of its own peculiar constitution and organisation. A human eye receives a human world and a frog's eye receives a frog's world (Maturana & Varela, 1980). For this reason, I believe that there is a kind of meaningfulness in matter, a specific human potentiality that is not explicitly accounted for in Heidegger's thought. The traces of this presence are found in his famous metaphor about language which I am going to discuss next.

## THE HOUSE OF BEING

In *A Dialogue on Language* Heidegger confesses that he once called language 'clumsily enough, the house of Being' (1982a, p. 5). Despite the modesty of Heidegger's statement I take this metaphor to comprise much of his later thought. In the text Heidegger remembers the context in which he used this phrase. It was a dialogue during which he attempted to discuss the aesthetic ideal of *iki* with his Japanese interlocutor. However, this was not possible because the very essence of the ideal which was born in the Japanese language and culture could not be conveyed in a European language. In fact, '[t]he language of the dialogue constantly destroyed the possibility of saying what the dialogue was about' (*ibid.*). This prospect of the untranslatable of language would be a first hint for the clarification of Heidegger's poetical metaphor. Language is not a river, a medium or a bridge. It is a house with rooms, walls and doors, possibly because a human being is not a being that has language (ζῶον λόγον ἔχον) or speaks language but a being that dwells in language as we dwell in a house.

In order to explore this possibility I turn to *The Poetics of Space* where Gaston Bachelard discusses *being in intimate places* as our basic entrance to the world and the human condition. Bachelard argues in this book that 'our house is our corner of the world ... it is our first universe, a real cosmos in every sense of the word' (Bachelard, 1994, p. 4). It is our primary 'cast into the world' (p. 7). As he explains:

'Being reigns in a sort of earthly paradise of matter, dissolved in the comforts of an adequate matter. It is as though in this material paradise, the human being were bathed in nourishment, as though he were gratified with all the essential benefits (*ibid.*).

Bachelard's discussion of the materiality of the house colours Heidegger's own belief concerning our thrownness into the world with a more hospitable hue. The house in its materiality is welcoming the new materiality of a child. The interaction between them is a meeting of potentialities. In fact, he argues that '[t]he house we were born in is more than an embodiment of home, it is also an embodiment of dreams. Each one of its nooks and corners was a resting-place for daydreaming' (p. 15). For this reason the house 'is physically inscribed in us. It is a group of organic habits' (p. 14). We actually never learned to open a generic, universal, abstract door but the specific door of our specific home. The house is lived through its materiality but this materiality is received through imagination. He says

whenever the human being has found the slightest shelter ... the imagination builds "walls" of impalpable shadows, comfort itself within the illusion of protection—or, just the contrary, tremble behind thick walls, mistrust the staunchest ramparts. In short, in the most interminable of dialectics, the sheltered being gives perceptible limits to his shelter. He experiences the house in its reality and in its virtuality, by means of thought and dreams (p. 5).

For Bachelard daydreaming is not a mere incidental possibility people choose to engage with. It is what defines most our humanity. He believes that '[w]ithout it, man would be a dispersed being' (p. 7). Daydreaming is always incorporated in the places we lived in the past and these places will reappear and be transformed into new images in every new place we will inhabit. It almost seems that imagination is a potentiality of matter which springs up in images that sometimes do not have a verbal articulation.

Even though this might be the very domain where the sensible and the non-sensible first exist—even before any brute dichotomization takes place—Heidegger does not recognise this fluidity and moves along to construct the walls of the house of Being. Finding recourse to Stefan George's poem *The Word* he presents his argument by discussing the last line: 'Where word breaks off no thing may be' (Heidegger, 1982b, p. 60). He argues that the word is not what describes the presence of a thing. It is rather what allows the thing to present itself as this or that specific entity. In fact, he asserts that '[t]his relation is not ... a connection between the thing that is on one side and the word that is on the other. The word itself is the relation which in each instance retains the thing within itself in such a manner that it "is" a thing' (p. 66).

If for Bachelard our first house is our perception of the world and the first cast of Being, for Heidegger the walls of the house of Being are constituted by the relations words share with the things they name. In this way language reaches 'into all regions of presences, summons from them whatever is present to appear and to fade' (Heidegger, 1982c, p. 124). However, if there is actually a kind of experience that does not easily settle in the dichotomy of the sensible and the non-sensible then there might be things without names and names that keep other things concealed. Luce Irigaray in fact points out with certainty that in the process of naming something important is forgotten.

Between emergence from a body of flesh and the creation of Being, nothingness now intervenes. ... Man provides a foundation for himself on the basis of reducing to nothingness that from which the foundation proceeds. Names are born in the reduction to nothingness that constitutes the foundation. Between this reduction to nothingness and the transcendental horizon, out of the line of a ground that rests on the abyss of nothing, words are born (Irigaray, 1999, p. 99).

In the next section I want to investigate Irigaray's claim and illuminate what has slipped into oblivion but is still present in Heidegger's own language. In fact, I am following his own thread when he argues that: 'No matter in what way we may listen besides, whenever we are listening to something we are *letting something be said to us*, and all perception and conception is already contained in that act' (Heidegger, 1982c, p. 124).

## LISTENING TO SPATIAL METAPHOR

In *The Nature of Language* Heidegger invites his audience to undergo with him 'a thinking experience with language' (Heidegger, 1982b, p. 70). In order to do that, he turns to poetry and thought and he attempts to explain how these two regions share a relation of 'neighbourliness' (p. 95). As it is expected this discussion is packed with spatial meanings.

*Neighbourhood*, then, is a relation resulting from the fact that the one *settles face to face* with the other. Accordingly, the phrase of the *neighbourhood* of poetry and thinking means that the two *dwelt face to face with each other*, that *the one has settled facing the other, has drawn into the other's nearness* (p. 82, *emphasis added*).

But why is it that Heidegger's efforts to overcome the representational conceptions of language as a medium result in these spatial metaphors? If Heidegger is right that perception and conception are both enacted in that which is spoken by language, where do these processes take place and what is exactly being said in his own words? Heidegger himself ponders on the strong metaphorical reliance of his thought.

This remark about what makes a neighbourhood is by way of figurative talk. Or are we already saying something to the point? What, really, does "figurative talk" mean? We are quick to give the answer, never giving it a thought that we cannot claim to have a reliable formulation so long as it remains unclear what is talk and what is imagery, and in what way language speaks in images, if indeed language does speak at all (*ibid.*).

Similarly to Bachelard's account of daydreaming Heidegger—in a self-reflective move—sees the emergence of images and most importantly of spatial images in his

own reflections about language. Heidegger, however, in contrast to Bachelard, does not recognise the way that the body links dwelling with thinking and language. Metaphor, in fact, seems to point to this exact connection. Ricoeur for example argues that

The very expression “figure of speech” implies that in metaphor, as in the other tropes or turns, discourse assumes the nature of a body by displaying forms and traits which usually characterize the human face, man’s “figure”; it is as though the tropes gave to discourse a quasi-bodily externalization. By providing a kind of figurability to the message, the tropes make dis-course appear (Ricoeur, 1978, p. 145).

Heidegger’s own choice to marginalise both body and space makes him unable to receive metaphor’s message or listen to language’s Saying which is a continual allusion to the potentiality of the sensible. This does not mean that Heidegger fails to offer a non-metaphysical account of matter. When he says that ‘what speaks to us only becomes perceivable through our response. Our hearing is in itself a responding’ (1996, p. 48) his own thinking sounds metaphorical but it is the only way to express this fundamental truth; being-in-the-world means that our bodily existence is already an interpretation of the world. Seen under this lens a metaphor instead of emphasising a duality can instead shed light to the domain that allows the movement between multiple spheres and the production of images. This movement is not exhausted in language but refers, in my opinion, to the more primordial structure of imagination that includes the body. George Lakoff in fact argues that ‘[t]he imaginative capacity is also embodied—indirectly—since the metaphors, metonymies, and images are based on experience, often bodily experience’ (Lakoff, 1987, p. xiv). This I discuss further in the concluding section.

## CONCLUSION

The body is simultaneously characterised by its potentiality to enter a specific situatedness and create its place but it can also function as a medium and open up new worlds. Being-in-the-world is being-there-in-a-body. Maurice Merleau-Ponty argues that the body itself can enact the movement between the literal and the metaphorical.

The body is our general medium for having a world. Sometimes it is restricted to the actions necessary for the conservation of life, and accordingly it posits around us a biological world; at other times, elaborating upon these primary actions and moving from their literal to a figurative meaning, it manifests through them a core of new significance: this is true of motor habits such as dancing. Sometimes, finally, the meaning aimed at cannot be achieved by the body’s natural means; it must then build itself an instrument and it projects thereby around itself a cultural world (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 146).

In my opinion this interpretation illuminates the nature of the human body which in its potentiality allows our moving beyond our particular situation. Language is the 'house of Being' but since it is through a body that we walk and eat, talk and sleep, our bodily space is inscribed in language and language is inscribed in our bodies. Heidegger's marginalisation of space, body and metaphor kept this relation veiled. However, the traces of this truth can be found when the cut threads are put back together. On this point Luce Irigaray argues that

The physical constitution of beings is forgotten in the metaphysics of Being. Nature is re-created by the *logos*. In oblivion of the fact that what is done over in this way keeps its physical qualities as well. Of the fact that the economy of the physical being is always recalled in every one of man's fabrications. That the living body as *Gestell* always leaves traces in these fabrications. Forgotten traces, they persist as the unthought and unthinkable aspects of the world that man has fabricated for himself (Irigaray, 1999, p. 87).

Heidegger's famous metaphor says a lot about the philosopher's perhaps unconscious remembrance and desire for 'his first "house": his dwelling within a living body ...' (Irigaray, 1999, p. 70). Dwelling within a living body, dwelling in a body and dwelling with other bodies seems to be what the spatial metaphor is revealing and what mortals need to listen. The Saying of language echoes in the 'house of Being' but this house is alive, made of flesh and blood and constantly changing. This liveliness is captured through poetical language and metaphor. Their originality might not be a proof of linguistic inventiveness but of alitheic revealing. This is, in fact, poetical language's 'second-order reference' which according to Ricoeur 'constitutes the primordial reference to the extent that it suggests, reveals, unconceals—or whatever you say—the deep structures of reality to which we are related as mortals who are born into this world and who dwell in it for a while' (Ricoeur, 1978, p. 154). In this sense, Heidegger's spatial metaphors do not describe the philosopher's confusion regarding the metaphorical constitution of metaphysics but language's original function that is performed by a being that dwells in a body and daydreams about the house of Being.

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